

REVEREND
GARY DAVIS

1935 - 1949



Rory Blom



YAZOO
L-1023

L-1023
Side A

Reverend Gary Davis 1935-1939

YAZOO
Side B

- *The Angel's Message To Me* (1935)
- *The Great Change In Me* (1935)
- *I'm Throwin' Up My Hand* (1935)
- *You Got To Go Down* (1935)
- *I Can't Bear My Burden By Myself* (1949)
- *I Belong To The Band - Hallelujah!* (1935)
- *I Am The True Vine* (1935)

- *Lord, Stand By Me* (1935)
- *Twelve Gates To The City* (1935)
- *Have More Faith In Jesus* (1935)
- *O Lord, Search My Heart* (1935)
- *You Can Go Home* (1935)
- *Meet Me At The Station* (1949)
- *Cross And Evil Woman Blues* (1935)

This is a collection of the early 78 recordings made by Reverend Gary Davis. Twelve of the pieces presented here are from his 1935 session. *Meet Me At The Station* and *I Cannot Bear My Burden By Myself* were recorded in 1949 in Harlem, New York City.

Gary Davis was born in 1896 in Lawrence County South Carolina. He was brought up in the country by his elderly grandmother. He was left blind at an early age and recalls that his loss of sight occurred after a doctor put "some drops" into his eyes. His grandmother made him his first guitar and by his early teens he was an accomplished musician on the five-string banjo, harmonica and guitar. He played in a string band in Greenville, South Carolina and there met Willie Walker (cf. Yazoo L-1013, East Coast Blues) whose many ragtime instrumentals Reverend Davis can play. In 1933 he was ordained as a minister. During the thirties he travelled and lived in Durham, North Carolina and attended a school for the blind in that city. It was in Durham that he met and played with Blind Boy Fuller, Bull City Red, and Sonny Terry.

Reverend Davis has always had a great admiration for the playing of Lonnie Johnson, Buddy Moss, Willie Walker and Blind Blake, but he never thought to imitate. Instead he concentrated on developing his own style. It was this "style" that he taught to Blind Boy Fuller, Bull City Red and Brownie McGhee and that the majority of blues listeners tend to classify as Fuller's. (Fuller came to Davis with only the knowledge of playing in open tunings and with a bottleneck. After their association Fuller recorded many of the pieces that Davis had taught him. It is apparent on hearing Fuller's recordings of *Twelve Gates*, *Piccolo Rag*, *She's Funny That Way* and *Mama, Let Me Lay It On You* that these were second hand imitations taken from another source. I have verified this teacher/student relationship over the past ten years by taping Reverend Davis doing one song in many different styles and then in the way he showed it to Fuller.)

Fuller, Davis and Bull City Red travelled to New York in July of 1935 to record. This was to be the first in a long series of successful recordings for Fuller but for Reverend Davis it was a short lived experience. He recorded 15 songs under the name Blind Gary and accompanied several of Fuller's tunes playing second guitar. Davis was very dissatisfied with his personal treatment and payment and this coupled with the A & R man's insistence to record blues when Davis had only desired to record gospel numbers ended up in an argument. The result was that the company never recorded "Blind Gary" again.

Davis then moved up to New York City in the forties and has lived there ever since. He recorded a rare 78 in 1949 and was further recorded once the "folk revival" got under way. During the fifties and sixties he was a favorite on the concert and club circuits where the emphasis for this new "white" audience was on guitar techniques. In the last fifteen years he has recorded nine lp's which demonstrate his skill for guitar instrumentals, gospel singing and carnival show songs.

Blues historians tend to classify the guitar style of Reverend Davis as an imitation of Blind Blake's. But this is quite absurd. Blake's technique was limited to his style of music. Davis uses a much more complicated approach to guitar playing which employs rhythmic and linear counter-point behind a sung musical statement. His instrumentals go beyond the ordinary "dance rag" and can depict a marching band, a battle, a broken car or the dreams of the devil. Reverend Davis has also perfected more than one style. He can play in the gentle manner of John Hurt (*You Got The Pocket Book I Got The Key, Cocaine Blues, Candyman*) or the more primitive bottleneck style (*Whistlin' Blues*) or even double thumb frail banjo dance tunes (*Cripple Creek*) or play carnival style banjo (*Come Down and See Me Some Time*). But his major achievement is developing a guitar style that incorporated more than a syncopated bass or an

alternating bass but used a variation of these played against a treble melody that was coupled with a middle registered harmony. It is this style that is clearly shown on this disc.

During his youth Davis broke his left hand wrist and it set in an unusual position. This allowed him to play many unorthodox chord positions. His right hand picking technique is based on the use of two fingers, thumb and index. There are no rules for the manner in which these two are used. Many times the thumb plays treble notes to give them the right accent. However when playing single string runs he generally alternates every other note between thumb and index. This produces a very "accented" rhythmic quality. He has developed "rolls" that double time the rhythm or accentuate the existing time signature. These are achieved by allowing the thumb to play a roll against the index finger playing the dominant note in that key. He uses a thumb pick for some songs and prefers to play without picks for the softer carnival show tunes.

This disc presents the religious music of Gary Davis with the exceptions of two blues. As with many other ragtime guitarists, Reverend Davis tends to favor the key of C. But for him each key has its own individual sound and there are pieces played in the keys of A, C, E, F, and G on this disc. Davis has the uncanny ability of being able to play proficiently in any key. His most unusual arrangement conceptions are found in those songs placed in the key of F.

It is hard for me to tell when Reverend Davis' style matured. The 1935 recordings have a rough vocal quality about them but a very competent guitar sound. This could be attributed to his youth, the bad atmosphere in the studio created by the situation, or Davis' not using the capo in the proper position on the guitar. The later recordings done in 1949 show a much more controlled sound. The guitar used on his 1935 session was a steel bodied National resonator guitar. This was ideal for street-singing as it could project a powerful tone but for recording it had many disadvantages. This model of guitar tends to exaggerate the treble notes and diminish the clarity of the bass strings. On the 1949 sides he is using a wooden bodied Gibson guitar that is more suitable for his playing. This could account for the difference in atmosphere besides the difference in recording techniques.

Davis' singing technique depends on the type of material he is doing. For religious pieces he tends to preach, shout and sing with as much intensity as possible. His blues are marked by interesting guitar arrangements against an al-



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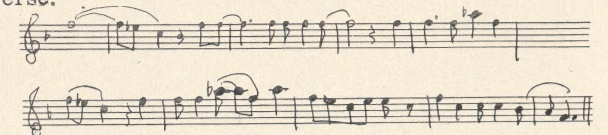
most spoken verse. His carnival show songs tend to have softer guitar arrangements that are used solely as an accompaniment and here his singing is more melodic but never with the intensity of his gospel music.

There are seven songs on this disc played in the key of C. *I Am The True Vine*, *You Can Go Home*, *Have More Faith In Jesus*, *You Got To Go Down*, *I Belong To The Band*, *The Great Change In Me*, *Lord Stand By Me*. All are in a 4/4 time signature and played in either an 8 or 16 verse chorus construction. Davis uses almost the same guitar arrangement for *I Belong To The Band* and *Stand By Me*. This is one of his favorites which depicts the singing of the women and men in church. The bass runs of the guitar are an imitation of the men's vocal parts while the treble is the women's. These guitar arrangements are also examples of the type of counter-point Davis puts behind his vocals.

Twelve Gates To The City, *Meet Me At The Station*, *Throwin' Up My Hands* and *I Cannot Bear My Burden* are all played in the key of A. The first three songs are similar in technique and have many of Davis' trademarks like the use of an A diminished chord and an inverted long A chord. There are many typical runs in these pieces that have been incorporated into the music of Fuller and McGhee. Most interesting is the beginning of the blues *Throwin' Up My Hands* where when the guitar part has reached the time for the II chord Davis plays a quick succession of chords on each downbeat that goes D-F-E-D-A. This is an imitation of a piano end run and you can hear clearly the two lines running opposite each other with the addition of middle register harmony notes.

Lord Search My Heart is played in the key of G and is an ordinary 16 bar blues. Davis' use of a sharpened C sung against the playing of a G7 chord is very interesting. The song begins in G7 and not G as do most blues in this key. This arrangement is typical of any Blues in G played by a North Carolinian guitarist except this time it reaches a complexity that only Davis could manage. There is an interplay between bass and treble runs at the end of each sung line that is unique. The guitar break is quite strange and tends to sound almost "Country and Western". There is also a short single string run in the break that is reminiscent of Lonnie Johnson.

The Angel's Message To Me is played in the key of F. The structure of this tune is unusual as it has six measures in 4/4 then one in 2/4 and then returns to its 4/4 time signature. The tonality of this tune is best shown in the verse:



It is a very modal blues effect. Davis has several other excellent tunes of similar texture that are played in this key. He also plays his famous *Soldiers Drill* and *Devil's Dream* instrumentals in this key. The key of F is a very challenging position for guitarists.

Cross and Evil Women Blues is played in the key of E and has many unique features about it. This was not a style that was imitated by any other North Carolinian blues singer and it seems unique to Davis. It has a very modern forties sound and varies from the ordinary blues structure by having the following construction:

E-E-E-E7/A-A/E7/E-C#7-F#7-B7/E

Davis uses this progression for many religious song arrangements. He also employs the guitar to play behind the vocal notes so at some times the guitar goes from a high E chord to a D chord and then back to the dominant E.

For those interested in further studies of the styles of Reverend Davis I suggest you see: *Holy Blues/Rev. Gary Davis* and *The Gary Davis Guitar Instruction Book*.



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YAZOO SIDE B

REVEREND GARY DAVIS - 1935-1949

Lord, Stand By Me
Twelve Gates To The City
Have More Faith In Jesus
O Lord, Search My Heart
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